

Democrats rip into 'charming' Bush

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - President Bush has charmed a number of Democrats on Capitol Hill with his engaging personality, yet many have begun to revolt against what they see as his heartless proposals. On the eve of Bush presenting to Congress a recommendation to cut taxes by \$1.6 trillion over 10 years, Democrats were up in arms on Wednesday, charging the package would cost too much, go largely to the rich and, despite promises to the contrary, leave a number of children behind.

“There is going to be one hell of a fight over this and there should be,” vowed U.S. House of Representatives Democratic Whip David Bonior of Michigan.

“George W. Bush is not going to be able to charm himself in to a big tax cut,” said Rep. Stephanie Tubbs Jones, an Ohio Democrat and member of the Congressional Black Caucus.

“I think the White House and Republicans up here have underestimated the resolve by Democrats to take them on,” said Sen. Paul **Wellstone**, a Minnesota Democratic.

The White House and congressional Republicans have been openly giddy over Bush's ability to reach out to Democrats, often one on one, since taking office on Jan. 20. House Republican Whip Tom DeLay of Texas has credited Bush with helping set a new bipartisan tone in the Republican-led Congress.

“This is what we have long needed,” DeLay said last Friday after Bush addressed a Republican retreat in Williamsburg, Virginia, where he preached cooperation, not confrontation.

Yet it is an open question how much cooperation there will be when it comes to cutting taxes, improving education and expanding Social Security and Medicare -- all Bush priorities. Sen. Edward Kennedy, a Massachusetts Democratic who joined Bush for a movie at the White House last week, said he expects to work with the new president on education.

But Kennedy called a news conference on Wednesday to announce introduction of a bill to increase the federal minimum wage, and to denounce Bush's stand on the issue.

“President Bush supports raising the minimum wage, but only if the states have the option of rejecting the increase,” said Kennedy, the leading liberal voice on Capitol Hill.

“Allowing states to opt out violates the nation's 60-year-old commitment to the principle that working men and women are entitled to a fair minimum wage,” Kennedy said.

On Tuesday, Kennedy challenged Bush on a campaign promise to bring Republicans and Democrats together on a patients bill of rights. Kennedy did so by joining Sen. John McCain of Arizona, who had competed against Bush for the 2000 Republican presidential nomination, in introducing a bill of their own.

Bush promptly raised objections to the measure, opposed by industry groups, and said he wanted more time to craft his own legislation.

“George W. Bush, like many people born with a silver spoon in his mouth, can be very charming,” said Rep. Maurice Hinchey, a New York Democrat.

“He can smile and he can tell a joke, but let's not confuse substance with charm,” Hinchey said. “And he's not half as smart as (former Democratic President) Bill Clinton.”

Hinchey was among a dozen members of the congressional Progressive Caucus who held a news conference on Wednesday to denounce the Bush tax cut. They charged that the proposed tax relief would go mainly to the wealthy at the expense of the middle class and not leave enough for a number of federal efforts, particularly ones to improve education.

“He says he doesn't want to leave any child behind, but his tax cut would force us to leave a number of children behind,” said **Wellstone**.